

The Blue Lotus

Oriental Research between Philology, Botany and Poetics?

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Introduction¹

Probably everyone who has attempted to translate a classical Sanskrit text with some amount of real-life information on plants will retain some sort of bad (scientific) conscience. Often one resorts to dictionaries for identification, in the best case supplemented by scattered studies that centre either on single texts or authors,² well aware of the fact that these dictionaries do not represent the current state of research. And although we know that modern Western and ancient Eastern terminology often only seem to match as long as we have the dictionary before us, but differ confusingly when we examine indigenous definitions, we could easily tend to think that in the case of plants the matter might be easier than in the case of, for instance, philosophy.

Within Indian flora the ubiquitous names for lotuses and water lilies are sometimes a source of incalculable problems, since apart from considering up-to-date botanical research for their identification, we would need to understand and weigh the intention of the author as well as the conventions of the literary genre we are dealing with. In other words, apart from considering lexical problems, we need to keep in mind the following questions: Did the author, in a poetical image involving a lotus, mean to give a botanically accurate description of a plant? Does he refer to popular or proto-scientific notions of his times, which we now know were wrong? Does he follow literary conventions which he himself knew to be imagination? What can

¹ I should like to thank WALTER SLAJE and CLAUS VOGEL for their comments on an earlier version of this article, furthermore M. MAITHRIMURTHI for alerting me to the Sinhalese names for lotus, and to WILHELM BARTHOLOTT for his elucidating comments on lotuses and water-lilies.

² For instance M. A. MEHENDALE: "The Fauna in the *Āraṇyakaparvan* of the Mahābhārata." In: *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 68 (1987), p. 327–344; or: HANS HENSGEN: "Die Fauna bei Kālidāsa I, II". In: *IJ* 2 (1958), p. 31–53; p. 128–148.

be expected as the knowledge about specific plants during the times of the respective author?³

These issues cannot often be treated satisfactorily, but to ignore them can lead to grave misinterpretations. In the case of some names for lotuses and water lilies these problems occur in combination as the following example may demonstrate:

*sa puṣkarākṣaḥ kṣatajokṣitākṣaḥ
kṣarat kṣatebhyaḥ kṣatajaṃ durīkṣam /
kṣatair gavākṣair iva samvṛtāṅgaḥ
sākṣāt sahasrākṣa ivāvabhāti //*

“Indem seine Augen mit Blut besprengt sind, hat er [gewissermaßen] (weiß-rötliche) Lotusaugen; der Anblick des Blutes, das aus den Wunden strömt, ist kaum zu ertragen; da sein Körper von Wunden wie von ‘Bullaugen’ überdeckt ist, erscheint er wie der leibhaftige tausendäugige [Indra].”⁴

Regarding the comparison of the eyes with a lotus BRINKHAUS remarks: “*puṣkara* (‘*Nelumbo nucifera*’) ist ungewöhnlich als *upamāna* für ‘Auge’ und hier sicherlich bewußt gewählt.”⁵ He rightly states that *puṣkara* is used for the blossom of the lotus, which can be of a light red colour. But it would have been easy to go astray here. A less proficient translator could easily gain the impression that *puṣkara* is predominantly yellow,⁶ or even blue.⁷ One should also add that all the Sanskrit dictionaries that one could possibly use, those by BÖHTLINGK, MONIER-WILLIAMS, APTE and MYLIUS, explain *puṣkara* as “blue lotus”.

The standard reference article on the Sanskrit names for lotuses and water lilies is by the late master of “Indische Realienkunde” Wilhelm Rau.⁸ It is a collection of references for 101 names for lotuses and water lilies in the main works of Classical Sanskrit poetry in the first millennium of our era. This is

³ For a discussion of “Naturbeobachtung” and related problems pertaining to Indian plants, see ALBRECHT WEZLER: “Bemerkungen zu einigen von Naturbeobachtung zeugenden Textstellen und den Problemen ihrer Interpretation.” In: *StII* 13/14 (1987), p. 321–346.

⁴ *Nāṭyaśāstra* (16.86). Text and translation quoted from HORST BRINKHAUS: “Der Anuprāsāṅkāra bei Bhāmaha und Daṇḍin.” In: *Berliner Indologische Studien* 15 (1989), p. 7.

⁵ BRINKHAUS 1989.

⁶ “Bei *puṣkara* scheint es sich somit um eine Bezeichnung für die Blüte der *Nelumbo nucifera*, besonders der gelben, zu handeln.” RENATE SYED: *Die Flora Altindiens in Literatur und Kunst*. München 1990 [PhD. dissertation], p. 672. By the way, this problem is imaginary, because the blossom of the Asian lotus is pink at first and gradually fades to a creamy white.

⁷ “... *puṣkara*, *rājīva*, and *vanaja*, which have dark blue flowers ...” RAM KARAN SHARMA: *Elements of Poetry in the Mahābhārata*. New Delhi 1988, p. 260.

⁸ “Lotusblumen.” In: *Asiatica. Festschrift Friedrich Weller*. Wiesbaden 1954, p. 505–513.

followed by a brief analysis with the help of ROXBURGH's *Flora Indica* and other botanical works.⁹ In brief the result is that Indian poets differentiated between lotuses (*Nelumbo nucifera*) and water lilies (*Nymphaea cerulæ* etc.), while further distinction is mainly made through colour.

Nevertheless, despite this well-known article, it seems almost impossible to implement this simple distinction between the two species without rewriting the dictionaries: water lilies are still often called lotuses. The problem is rather similar to that of the Indian mongoose (*nakula*), which appears wrongly as "ichneumon" in the dictionaries, and is, despite an article by KOHL, which was published in the same volume as that of RAU, often mistranslated.¹⁰

In some cases the reason for inexactitude may have been aesthetical: a "night lotus" may sound more pleasant than a "night water lily", just as the word "*hamsa*" ("goose") has often been translated as "swan", despite the fact that swans are not indigenous to India and that there are therefore no words for "swan" in Sanskrit. But, in fact, there is no night-blossoming lotus, only a night-blossoming water lily.

The inexact usage is partly due to the fact that there is, among other meanings of the word,¹¹ a so-called "egyptian lotus" of blue color, which is, however, botanically not a lotus (*Nelumbo*), but a water-lily (*Nymphaea*). The confusion is undoubtedly facilitated by too brief remarks in some encyclopedias,¹² although in the anglophone world it is comparatively easy to acquire sound information: Even the electronic version of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1999 Standard Edition) contains a lucid and fairly detailed account of lotuses and water-lilies and a current version of the monolingual *Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus* clearly states that lotus, as we would expect, denotes "any water lily of the genus *Nelumbo*, esp. *Nelumbo nucifera* of India".¹³ Thus

⁹ See his footnotes 2 and 3 for a list.

¹⁰ An analysis of this case can be found in CLAUDIUS NENNINGER: "Wie kommt die Pharaonsratte zu den vedischen Göttern." In: StII 18 (1993), 161–168.

¹¹ For instance the so-called "Lotos-eaters" *lotophagoi*, a tribe encountered by Odysseus, were, according to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, ingesting a fermented drink produced from a bush native in Southern Europe (*Ziziphus lotus*).

¹² The German encyclopedia *Der Brockhaus* is too brief in its chapter on lotuses to be unambiguous. *Sub voce* "Lotus" we find among other meanings of the word the explanation: "ägyptische und südasiatische Arten von Seerose und Verwandte". (*Der grosse Brockhaus*. Wiesbaden 16/1955. Similarly in the 17th edition.) In the 17th edition of 1973 we find s.v. "Seerose": "Gelegentlich heißt auch die Gelbe Teichrose [...] und die Echte (Indische) Lotosblume (*Nelumbo nucifera*) Indische S[eerose]." The current "2001 multimedia premium edition" of the *Brockhaus*, despite the statement that the complete text of the printed edition is contained in the computerized version, contains only a thin abstract.

¹³ *Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus*. Ed. SARA TULLOCH. Oxford 1995, s.v. "lotus".

apparently “water lily” can be used for the *Nymphaeaceae*, the botanical order that used to subsume *Nelumbo* (lotus) and *Nymphaea* (water lily),¹⁴ but one cannot use “lotus” for *Nymphaea*.¹⁵

In scientific usage there is no reason to depart from the botanical nomenclature, which uses “lotus” for the genus *nelumbo* and “water-lily” for the genus *nymphaea*. These distinctions should be adhered to in order to avoid or prolong confusion, especially when the names and identifications of these plants form the topic of one’s research.¹⁶

Before introducing the main topic of the present article, a new botanical classification of the genus *Nelumbo*¹⁷ should be mentioned in order to simplify the task at hand. According to BORSCH and BARTHLOTT of the Botanical Institute at the University of Bonn, now famous for their discovery of the microrelief of the lotus leaf, which produces its water-repellent and self-cleaning properties (“lotus effect”) and which has in the last years found a wide industrial application,¹⁸ the vegetative morphology and anatomy as well

¹⁴ A brief history of the varying positions on the relationship of *Nelumbo* with cognate families as well as the establishment of the family *Nelumbonaceae* is summarized in: THOMAS BORSCH, CHRISTOPH NIENHUIS and WILHELM BARTHLOTT: “*Nelumbo*: Biology and Systematics of an exceptional Plant.” In: *Floral Characteristics and Diversity of East Asian Plants. Proceedings of the First International Symposium on Floristic Characteristics and Diversity of East Asian Plants*. Beijing: China Higher Education Press, Springer-Verlag 1996, p. 410.

¹⁵ Nowadays the separate order of *Nelumbonaceae* has been established.

¹⁶ Although he quotes RAU’s “Lotusblumen”, LIENHARD has neglected these clarifying distinctions in a recent article: “... the bud of the day lotus opens and blossoms under the rays of the sun; that of the night lotus, under the rays of the moon.” SIEGFRIED LIENHARD: “On a number of names for lotus in particular *aravinda*.” In: *IJ* 43 (2000), p. 398. The error is of course older, SCHMIDT wrote: “Die unter dem allgemeinen Namen ‘Lotus’ gehenden Spezies des Genus *Nelumbium* Juss. und *Nymphaea* L. ...” In a footnote he adds: “Die Botaniker verstehen bekanntlich unter *Lotus* etwas ganz anderes als ‘Seerose’ oder ‘Wasserlilie’.” See RICHARD SCHMIDT: “Beiträge zur Flora Sanskritica. III. Der *Lotus* in der Sanskrit-Literatur.” In: *ZDMG* 67 (1913), S. 462.

¹⁷ THOMAS BORSCH and WILHELM BARTHLOTT: “Classification and Distribution of the Genus *Nelumbo* Adans. (*Nelumbonaceae*).” In: *Beiträge zur Biologie der Pflanzen* 68 (1994), p. 421–450.

¹⁸ See W. BARTHLOTT/C. NEINHUIS: “Purity of the sacred lotus, or escape from contamination in biological surfaces.” In: *Planta* 202 (1997), 1–8. On page 5 he sums up: “The results presented above document an almost complete self-cleaning ability by water-repellent plant surfaces. This can be demonstrated most impressively with the large peltate leaves of the sacred lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*). According to tradition in Asian religions, the sacred lotus is a symbol for purity, ensuing from the same observations we have made. This knowledge is already documented in Sanskrit writings, which fact has led us to call this phenomenon the ‘Lotus-Effect.’” For this the Indologist can indeed quote a number of references, the most famous being probably *Bhagavadgītā* 5.10: *lipyate na sa pāpena padmapatram ivāmbhasā*.

as palynology do not justify a division into subspecies; there is thus, if we exclude the *Nelumbo nucifera* subsp. *lutea* that is found in North-America, only one species with a wide distribution in South-Asia: *Nelumbo nucifera* Gaertner subsp. *nucifera*, Fruct, I, 73 /1788. Type: 673.7/673.8 LINN (microfiche),¹⁹ the Asian or Sacred Lotus.²⁰ That means that the more than eighty names for “lotus” that are found in Sanskrit literature correspond to one single botanical species. As a consequence the use of other scientific names in secondary literature (*N. indica*, *speciosum* etc.) can be ignored.

The Sanskrit names for “lotus” fall into two groups: primary names and secondary, often poetic epithets that are expressive of its imagined or actual properties.

The most important are that it “originates in water/mud”, has “[edible] rhizomes (*bisa*)”, or that it is imagined to have “thousand petals”. The number of names is already considerable and can, at least in theory, be enlarged, since the enormous flexibility of the Sanskrit language enables the poet to create new ways to arrive at these meanings. In this connection we need to keep in mind that Indian grammarians distinguish etymology (*yoga*) and the conventional use, i.e. the actual denotation (*rūḍhi*), of a word. In our case this means that, for instance, the word *ambuja*, literally “that which is born in/from the water”, does not automatically denote everything “born in water”, i.e. all aquatic plants or even fish, but, through its conventional use, is limited to lotuses.²¹ New formations inherit the conventional meaning of its archetype: *vārija*, *ambujanma* etc. are also only lotuses. This is at least one of the conclusions that can be drawn from RAU’s list: water lilies are

¹⁹ THOMAS BORSCH/WILHELM BARTHLOTT 1994, p. 442. The article also lists a whole range of synonyms, among them *Nelumbium speciosum*, the name used by BÖHTLINGK in his *Petersburger Wörterbuch*.

²⁰ THOMAS BORSCH, CHRISTOPH NIENHUIS and WILHELM BARTHLOTT 1996, p. 408.

²¹ The word *pañkaja* is one of the stock examples for the so-called *yogarūḍha* words: “Here the derivative meaning and the conventional meaning coincide and refer to the same object. [...] e.g. *pañkaja* which popularly means ‘lotus’ by convention; the etymological sense ‘what grows in the mud’ is also applicable to it. The conventional usage restricts the application of the derivative sense. Otherwise the term *pañkaja* might refer to anything that grows in mud. [...] The well-known rule accepted by all Indian writers is that the conventional meaning is more powerful than the etymological meaning, since the former occurs to the mind immediately whereas the latter has to be known through analysis (*yogād rūḍhir baliyāsī śighravṛttivāt*).” KUNJUNNI RAJA: *Indian Theories of Meaning*. Adyar 1963, p. 61. We should add that this does not exclude the possibility of other conventional meanings, or even uses of the word in the literal sense. According to the larger *Petersburger Wörterbuch* *abja* (m.) can also mean, for instance, “mussel”, “moon”, or “Dhanvantari” – who was born, according to mythology, from the milk ocean –, but what is important for our purpose is that *abja* (n.) does not mean “water-lily”.

not called plants “that originate in water/mud”. The reason could have been that the main distinguishing characteristic of the lotus is not merely that it originates from water or mud, but that it is at the same time not stained by it. This feature distinguishes it from all other comparable aquatic plants including the water lilies. In other words the reason for the development of this particular *rūḍhi* may well have been the “lotus effect”.

Before dealing with the problem of the “blue lotus”, I give a systematic list of names from RAU’s article with his numbers.

1. Generic (i.e. no colour differentiation)

(a) plant: *abjinī* (2), *amburuhinī* (6), *ambhojinī* (8), *kamalinī* (23), *jalaruhalatā* (39), *naliniī* (45), *pañkajiniī* (55), *padminiī* (57), *padminikā* (58), *puṭakinī* (61), *bisiniī* (68), *mṛṇālinī* (72), *sarojiniī* (88), *saroruhinī* (90).

(b) blossom: *abja* (1), *ambuja* (3), *amburuh* (4), *amburuha* (5), *ambhoja* (7), *ambhoruha* (9), *aravinda* (10), *kamala(ka)* (21,22), *kuśeśaya* (31), *jalaja* (37), *jalajanma* (38), *jalasaṃbhava* (40), *jalodbhava* (41), *tāmarasa* (42), *daśadalaśata* (43), *nalina* (44), *nīraja* (46), *nīraruha* (47), *pañkaja* (54), *padma* (56), *payoja* (59), *puṣkara* (63), *bakasahavāsin* (66), *bisaprasūna* (67), *mahāravinda* (69), *mahotpala* (70), *rājīva* (77), *vanaja* (*vana* = water) (79), *vārija* (80), *vāriruha* (81), *śatapattra* (83), *sarasija* (85), *sarasiruha* (86), *saroja* (87), *saroruha* (89), *sahasrapattra* (91).

2. white (blossom): *pāṇḍusaroja* (60), *puṇḍarīka* (62), *sitapañkaja* (92).

3. red (blossom): *aruṇajalaja* (11), *aruṇaśatapattra* (12), *kokanada* (34), *raktakamala* (73), *raktavārija* (75), *lohitapañkaja* (78).

The high number is reduced to only a few names if we divide into primary names and secondary epithets that can be subsumed into patterns (sec.).

1. Generic

(a) plant: apparently no primary names.

Sec.: Mostly grammatical derivations formed by adding the suffixes *-in-ī* to a name for the lotus [blossom]. This accounts for all but *bisiniī* (“having rhizomes”), *mṛṇālinī* (“equipped with a lotus-stalk”), since here the affix is applied not to names for lotus, but only to names for its parts. Furthermore *puṭakinī* (“having folded petals”) and *jalaruhalatā* (“creeper growing in water”).

(b) blossom: *aravinda*, *kamala*, *nalina*, *padma*, *tāmarasa*, *puṣkara*, *rājīva*, *kuśeśaya*.

Sec.: The pattern “born/growing/[...] in water/mud” accounts for the largest group (including the analogous *bisaprasūna*), another is the “thousand-petalled”. Then there is *bakasahavāsin* (“fellow of the crane” [i.e. in that both live in the water]) and the unexpected formation *mahotpala* (70), “great water lily”, as a name for lotus.

2. white (blossom) *pundarīka*. Sec.: The two words listed by RAU simply mean “white lotus”, analogous formations are possible.
3. red (blossom) *kokanada*. Sec.: compounds denoting “red lotus”.

Here follows, for the sake of completeness, a list of the names for water lilies from RAU’s article:

<i>Nymphaea</i> (general)		<i>utpala, kuvalaya</i>
<i>Nymphaea</i> (white)	a) night-blooming	1. plant: <i>kumudinī, kumudvatī</i> 2. blossom: <i>kumuda, kairava</i>
	b) no time of blooming given	<i>kahlāra, sitotpala</i>
<i>Nymphaea</i> red (blossom)		<i>arunotpala, raktakuvalaya, raktotpala</i>
<i>Nymphaea</i> blue (blossom)		<i>asitotpala, indīvara, utpala, kaṇḍoṭṭa</i> (?), <i>kuvalaya, nilakuvalaya, nilotpala.</i>

The analysis of the names for lotuses and water lilies shows that the Indian writers distinguished clearly between the two species. One oddity already mentioned is the name *mahotpala* “great water lily” for lotus, one case of a poetical convention is the “golden lotus”, for which naturally only names with the adjective “golden” are found: *kanakakamala, kanakanalina, kāñcanapadma, cāmīkarapañkaja, śātakumbhakamala.*²²

The “Blue Lotus”

Thus only one problem remains, namely in the form of compounds, frequently encountered in literature, which denote “blue lotus”: *asitāmburuha, kṛṣṇakamala, nīlanalina, nīlanīraja, nīlapayoja, sitetarasaraja, nīlābja*. It is perhaps due to the wide-spread confusion between lotuses and water lilies that to talk of a blue lotus did not rouse suspicion. In BÖHTLINGK’S

²² RAU remarks: “Nelumbienblüten aus Gold finden sich natürlich nur in der Phantasia der kavis; von einem gelbblühenden Nelumbium, das man zur Erklärung anführen könnte, weiß ich nichts.” RAU 1954, p. 512.

dictionary we find “blaue Lotusblüte” as an entry for *puṣkara*; likewise MAYRHOFER in his *Kurzgefaßtes etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindischen*²³ s.v. *puṣkara*. And if we add more latin names for lotus and quote even more dictionaries, whose authors were themselves quoting half-digested botanical information, it becomes even more difficult to arrive at a decision.

But first let us note what RAU remarked in his article: “Ob es wirklich ein blaues Nelumbium gibt, ist mir zweifelhaft. Die Dichter kennen es.” And in a footnote he adds references:

“Lily Dexter Greene, Indian Antiquary, vol. LIX, 1930, p. 131: ‘The white, pink, and cream-coloured ones are the most common, but there is also a blue variety.’ – Ich wüßte gern, wo sie sich findet.”

In a note RAU quotes the ultimate source for the “blue lotus”:

“Dr. Carey considers this name derived from two Sungskrit words, viz. Neel, blue; and Umboja, generated in water. Although we have not yet found a blue Nelumbium in these parts of Asia, yet it is said to be a native of both Kashmeer and Persia.”²⁴

Despite this cautionary remark, SYED, in her detailed study of the problem, obviously felt compelled to reintroduce a “seltene blaue Nelumbo-Blüte”²⁵ in order to solve interpretatory problems, but without discussing the question of its existence.

RAU was of course correct in doubting the second-hand evidence adduced by ROXBURGH, for we can now safely say that there is no botanical evidence for a blue lotus.²⁶

To those scholars, who deal with realia of Indian culture, as for instance botany, medicine or art history, this may seem a commonplace statement. But in fact the problem persists as long as the substantial evidence from Sanskrit literature that seems to denote exactly that remains unexplained. And the evidence from Sanskrit literature from different genres that would point to a “blue lotus”, as we know from RAU, is quite substantial. What do the Indian poets mean by it? Is it, like the golden lotus, a convention among poets (*kavisamaya*), or a simple confusion with the blue water lily (*Nymphaea caerulea*)? These questions seem to have puzzled only a few. The readers of

²³ Heidelberg 1963; in his *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindischen* (Heidelberg 1996) he says simply “Lotosblüte”.

²⁴ RAU 1954, p. 512.

²⁵ SYED 1990, p. 626 and 630. On p. 650 even RAU’s doubts are quoted in extenso, but without comments.

²⁶ Information provided by W. BARTHOLOTT of the Botanical Institute, University of Bonn, in a letter of 31/3/99. (“Einen blauen Lotus gibt es absolut nicht: dies sind alles Seerosen, meistens *Nymphaea caerulea*.”).

poetry are perhaps not so much interested in the plants themselves as in the comparisons with them, the art historians, who are more likely to be aware of the differentiation between water-lilies and lotuses, were unlikely to stumble upon problematic passages in the Mahākāvya or in philosophical works. And finally there was always, as a last resort, the notion that in Sanskrit poetry no realistic depiction of the natural surroundings was striven at.²⁷

The first solution, i.e. to assume a poetical convention, is not very plausible, since it is difficult to imagine what would be gained by such an image. The second option, to assume a large-scale confusion between lotuses and water-lilies in the learned world, is even improbable, since not all poets while describing nature could have remained ignorant of the actual characteristics of the lotus, nor is there any other evidence of a confusion of the two species of *Nelumbo* and *Nymphaea*. Do we therefore have to abandon the idea that the clear distinction between the two species was adhered to by Indian authors, despite the fact that there are only few inconsistencies in nomenclature?

The problem would be solved if we could prove that *nīlābja* denotes “blue water lily”, very much as in the case of *mahotpala*, which is, even though the cause for its use is opaque, simply a name for “lotus”. The rationale behind the unexpected meaning could be that, since there is no blue lotus, a water lily must be necessarily meant. In itself this explanation is certainly not too convincing, for we would expect a reason or model for its formation or usage. This reason was always nearby. The ubiquitous *Amarakośa*,²⁸ when dealing at the end of its *vārivarga* with water lilies, states:

*syād utpalam kuvalayam atha nīlāmbujanma ca |
indīvaram ca nīle 'smin site kumudakairave ||37||*

“[The word] *kuvalaya* denotes a water-lily [of any colour] (*utpala*). *nīlāmbujanma* as well as *indīvara* [are used] for the blue [variety], *kumuda* and *kairava* for the white [variety].”

Here *nīlāmbujanma*, which can be taken as generic for *nīlābja* and the other synonyms, is indeed a name for a (blue) water lily – the names for lotus are

²⁷ WILHELM RAU: “Poetical conventions in Indian Kāvya Literature.” In: *The Adyar Library Bulletin* 50 (1986), S. 191–197.

²⁸ In the beginning of his article RAU cautions the reader from adopting the definitions of the Sanskrit-kośas, but it is astonishing that he has not compared his findings with them. And one should also add that his own assignment of certain names to particular plants cannot be totally free from their influence. The most obvious example is his identification of *mahotpala* as lotus, which ultimately rests on Mallinātha’s commentary to the passages he adduces, who in turn quotes the *Amarakośa*. Without this, one would have to translate and understand *mahotpala* as no more than a “large water-lily”!

dealt with a little later in the *Amarakośa*. In that list on names for lotuses *mahotpala* is mentioned, which explains the unexpected use of this name already noted above.²⁹

Similarly obvious is the *Mañbhakośa*,³⁰ where we find in verse 825d: *nīlābjam utpalam*. From this angle, i.e. if we regard *nīlābja* etc. as an irregular name for the blue *utpala*, we can understand all the problematic passages without contradiction to the system expounded by RAU, a system, which, as we should emphasize, was arrived at by analysing a considerable number of passages from classical Indian literature.

Other passages can be explained in the same way. For instance Ratnākaraśānti, commenting on the word *nīlapaṅkaja* in *Hevajratantra* 1.3.7, says *paṅkajam utpalam*,³¹ which we take not as a botanical statement, but as meaning [*nīla*]paṅkajam utpalam, “[blue] lotus is a [synonym for] utpala”. Similarly Mallinātha commenting on *Śiśupālavadha* 15.86 says: *nīlanalina = nīlotpalam*.³² Occurrences in philosophical contexts, as for instance in Abhinavagupta’s *Mālinīvārttika* 1.57,³³ could go back to *Pramānavārttika* 4.192 (*nīlaṃ sarojam*).³⁴

Finally there is one more problem to be solved, namely another definition in the *Amarakośa*³⁵:

*punḍarīkaṃ sitāmbhojam, atha raktasaroruhe |
raktotpalam kokanadam*

Here *raktotpala* is given as a name for red lotus, whereas it otherwise denotes red water-lily. One would also assume that *raktotpala* is simply a, however unexpected, name for “red lotus”, and is thus a case similar to *nīlābja* or *mahotpala*. But the crucial difference is that there is no evidence

²⁹ ... *padmaṃ nalinam aravindam mahotpalam*, Vārivarga 39cd. In two instances, which are wrongly grouped under *utpala* by SYED (p. 627), namely in *Śiśupālavadha* 8.23 and 8.48, the commentator Mallinātha identifies, as we would expect from someone who has memorised the *Amarakośa*, *mahotpala* as *aravinda*. Also Vanamālibhaṭṭa on *Gitagovinda* 10.5 (SYED 1990, p. 644).

³⁰ *Der Mañbhakośa mit Auszügen aus dem Commentare und drei Indices*. Ed. THEODOR ZACHARIAE. Wien/Bombay 1897, p. 60.

³¹ I am grateful to HARUNAGA ISAACSON, who is preparing an edition of this text, for this reference.

³² Compare also *Kīrātārjunīya* 9.57.

³³ See my *Abhinavagupta’s Philosophy of Revelation. An Edition and Annotated Translation of Mālinīśloka-vārttika I, 1–399*. Groningen 1998 (Groningen Oriental Studies. 14.). By the way this passage was the starting point for the present investigation.

³⁴ *The Pramānavārttikam of Ācārya Dharmakīrti [...]*. Ed. RAM CHANDRA. Pandeya/Delhi 1989.

³⁵ Also in Hemacandra’s *Abhidhānacintāmaṇi*, ed. BÖHTLINGK, p. 217, 1162–3 (4.228–9).

for a use of the word in that sense, at least the passages given by RAU and SYED do not suggest such a shift in meaning. Certainly this meaning may remain undetected, since in most cases the word can be interpreted as meaning red water-lily, just as *mahotpala* could of course mean no more than a "large water-lily". This case remains therefore unsolved. But the difference between *rakotpala* and *mahotpala* on the one hand, and the "blue lotus" on the other is that the latter cannot be interpreted in the literal sense. The blue lotus exists neither in nature, nor as a poetic convention in the imagination of the poets; it is a translational phantom.

To sum up: The identification of names for lotuses by Rau³⁶ is still valid, also in view of the new data collected by SYED. One problem identified by RAU, namely the words denoting a fictitious "blue lotus", a plant that does not occur in nature, can be solved by assuming that the normative force of the most important indigenous Sanskrit dictionary, the *Amarakośa*, which lists "blue lotus" (*nīlāmbujanma*) as another name for the blue water lily, has led authors to use *nīlābja*, *nīlasaroruba* and the like in this unexpected sense. This solution is more probable than to assume that the observed consistency in RAU's identification is accidental and that lotuses and water lilies were not properly distinguished in Sanskrit. The practical result is that for the purpose of translation we have to discard the dictionaries,³⁷ even recent ones,³⁸ and rely on the identification provided by RAU, with the only

³⁶ RAU 1954.

³⁷ Instead of collecting all the entries I shall briefly demonstrate typical errors: As indicated before the main source is the dictionary of BÖHTLINGK, from which the identifications were mostly adopted by MONIER-WILLIAMS and, recently, MYLIUS, while APTE sometimes deviates. Interestingly the three former interpret *nīlābja*, *nīlāmbujanma* etc. correctly as "blue water lily" (APTE: "blue lotus"), probably identified by BÖHTLINGK from the *Amarakośa*. For the same reason *mahotpala* is given correctly by BÖHTLINGK as "Lotus, Nelumbium Speciosum", whereas MONIER-WILLIAMS has turned this entry into: "a large water lily, Nelumbium Speciosum". Since the latin identification remains unchanged one must assume that the distinction between lotus and water lily was unknown to him, an assumption which is strengthened by his English-Sanskrit Dictionary, where all names for lotuses and water-lilies are listed under lotus, while the reader is referred to this entry under the lemma "water-lily". Some more examples: BÖHTLINGK and his followers wrongly identify *rājīva* and *puṣkara* as "blue lotus", *kokanada* as "red water-lily" ("Wasserrose" oder "Wasserlilie"), *kuśeśaya* as "eine am Tage sich öffnende Wasserlilie" etc., etc. APTE does not seem to distinguish between lotuses and water-lilies either (*kuśeśaya*: "a water-lily, a lotus in general"). Finally MONIER-WILLIAMS: *kuśeśaya*: "a water-lily", *kuśeśayākṣa*: "lotus-eyed". A. A. MACDONELL: *A practical Sanskrit Dictionary* (London 1924): *utpala* "(blue) lotus at a later stage called kamala".

³⁸ *Sanskrit-Wörterbuch der buddhistischen Texte aus den Turfan-Funden*. Göttingen 1994, vol. 1: *utpala* "blauer Lotus (vgl. Rau, Lotusblumen)". RAU's article cannot, as we have seen, be quoted in support of such an identification.

exception that words denoting "blue lotus" should be translated as "blue water-lily".

Up to now we have treated, as it were, of the far ends of the spectrum, namely the Sanskrit names for lotus, and the modern botanical classification, while the reader will have rightly wondered about the evidence in other Indian languages. The following brief remarks may therefore be found helpful, although a detailed discussion is beyond the scope of the present article.

Firstly, as one would expect, the fact that the English *kośakāras* did not properly distinguish between lotuses and water-lilies makes it rather difficult to investigate the problem, since presumably all bilingual dictionaries of modern Indian languages share the confusion about lotuses and water-lilies.³⁹

And because we can expect that modern Indian languages inherit the problems of the classificatory system in Sanskrit through loan-words, a mere search in dictionaries may not yield satisfactory results. Another, perhaps more fruitful approach would be to determine whether the nomenclature in a limited area and time accounts for the differences between these plants. Even though early Western "*kośakāras*" have failed to distinguish between these two species and although Indian English has surely been influenced by this practice, it is improbable that most people living in an area abounding in both those aquatic plants should have failed to distinguish them in nature, especially since parts of one of them, namely lotus roots and seeds, are omnipresent as edibles. It is rather to be expected that this distinction can and often is expressed unambiguously in most Indian languages.⁴⁰

³⁹ Some examples: 1) Hindi: CHATURVEDI/TIWARI: *A Practical Hindi-English Dictionary*. Delhi 1983: "*utpal* a (blue) lotus", "*nīl kamal* blue lotus". The same in: ARYENDRA SHARMA/HANS J. VERMEER: *Hindi-Deutsches Wörterbuch*. Band 1 (a-jhaurā). Heidelberg 1987, s.v. *utpal*. R.S. MCGREGOR: *The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*. Oxford 1993: *utpal* "a species of blue lotus; a lotus". 2) Bengali: *Samsad Bengali-English Dictionary*. Revised and enlarged second edition. Calcutta 1984: "*utpal* the water lily, the lotus, the blue lotus", *kamal* "the water lily, the lotus". 3) Tamil: J.P. FABRICIUS: *Tamil and English Dictionary*. Tranquebar 1897: *kuvalai* "the water-lily blue nelumbo". *tāmarai* "the lotus, or water-lily". *Tamil Lexikon* (Madras 1982, vol. VI, pt.1): *nīlam* "blue nelumbo". A slightly different case is T. BURROW/M.B. EMENEAU: *A Dravidian Etymological Dictionary*. Oxford 1984, where the botanical names are wrongly applied: For instance *Nymphaea lotus*, the name for the so-called Egyptian Lotus (see above), is given for *alli* and *āmpal*, whereas *neytal* is explained as "white Indian water-lily, *Nymphaea lotus alba*, blue nelumbo".

⁴⁰ This is of course slightly simplified, for observation can be mixed with botanical half-knowledge. For instance, one large monolingual Hindi dictionary has a long entry under *kamal*, from which it becomes clear that lotuses are meant: its roots and seeds can be eaten and also other descriptions of features of this plant are unambiguous. This observation is however mixed with secondary information of lesser quality, for the author also states that "the blue lotus exists in the north of Kashmir and in some parts of China. The

I was therefore glad to hear that in Sinhalese a clear distinction between white water-lily, blue water-lily and lotus is made and that it is improbable that anyone with a minimum knowledge of botanics would ever confuse the blue water-lily and the lotus.⁴¹ This case deserves special notice, because the word for lotus in Sinhalese is *nelum(-ba)*, which is certainly the source for our latinised *nelumbo*.⁴² It is tempting at first to relate this word to Tamil *nīlam*,⁴³ which the dictionaries of FABRICIUS and WINSLOW give, as one can now guess, as “blue lotus”. But the synonym given in both dictionaries, *karuṅkuvalai*, shows that a blue water-lily (*kuvalai* from Sanskrit *kuvalaya*) is meant and a relation with *nelumba* is from this angle improbable.⁴⁴

A further analysis would have to be based on an extensive collection of names for lotuses and water-lilies in different Indian languages as well as consultations with native speakers, which is beyond the aim of the present article, but for which it can hopefully serve as a basis.

Finally one remark on methodology may not be out of place here. For tackling a problem like that of the names of lotuses one has to interpret results of research in different disciplines, some within Indology, among them lexicography, poetics etc., others, in our case botany, external. The fact that philology is an indispensable tool for research in the field of Indian Cultural History is due to the peculiar problems that inevitably occur when dealing with medieval Indian literary sources, whereas the other methods to be employed are dictated by the problems to be solved. This is certainly not a new insight⁴⁵ and would not really be worth mentioning except for counteracting

yellow lotus is found especially in America, Siberia, Northern Germany and elsewhere.” *nīl kamal viśeṣakar kaśmīr ke uttar aur kabīm kabīm cīna meṃ hota hai / pīt kamal amerikā, sāberiyā, uttar jarmanī ityādi deśoṃ meṃ miltā hai /*, Hindī Śabdasāgar, ed. Śyām Sundar Dās, Kāśī Nagarī Pracāriṇī Sabhā 1967.

⁴¹ Private communication by MUDAGAMUWE MAITHRIMURTHI.

⁴² The name *Nelumbo* occurs first in TOURNEFORT’s *Institutiones Rei Herbaria* published in 1700, but ultimately goes back, not to LINNAEUS, but to PAUL HERMANN’s (1646–1695) *Paradisus Botanicus*, whose work is based on a collection of plants from Sri Lanka. For details, see BORSCH/BARTHOLOTT, p. 441.

⁴³ There is no evidence for a use of *nīla* in the sense of *nīlotpala* in Sanskrit, but compare Pāli *mahānīla* (PTS Dictionary, s.v. *nīla* “great blue lotus”).

⁴⁴ It would be also unlikely to assume a loan from Sanskrit *nīlambuja*, because then one would have to explain why the one problematic item among the many words for lotus was selected to denote something that is neither its literal (“blue lotus”) nor its actual (“blue water-lily”) meaning.

⁴⁵ For the present topic one only needs to quote SCHLEGEL: “Ich kann bei dieser Gelegenheit nicht umhin den Wunsch zu äußern, es möchte sich ein Kenner des Sanskrit mit einem Botaniker verbinden, [...] um uns Europäern eine Indische Dichter-Botanik zu geben.” *Indische Bibliothek*. Eine Zeitschrift von AUGUST WILHELM VON SCHLEGEL. Erster Band. Bonn 1823, p. 329.

a tendency to an artificial limitation or compulsory combination of research methods in accord with scientific fashion. Such an approach limits the number of possible research topics and can only be an infringement upon the freedom of research and therefore counterproductive. It is from this angle unfortunate that the title of the last *Deutscher Orientalistentag* held in Bamberg in 2001 “Orientalistik zwischen Philologie und Sozialwissenschaft” can easily be misunderstood to indicate such a contraction of the study of (Indian) cultural history. Most interpretations of “zwischen” in the title of the conference are, from this perspective, misleading and I would definitely argue against an interpretation of “zwischen” as a statement of dichotomy, or of development. If “Philologie und Sozialwissenschaft” should stand merely for two arbitrary points and indicate that a whole spectrum of disciplines, including interdisciplinary combinations, is meant, it would hardly be more than a new expression of the idea of the university. To adapt the famous saying of Kālidāsa:

*navīnam ity eva na sādhu sarvaṃ
na cāpi vṛddho naya ity avadyam
santaḥ parīkṣyānyatarad bhajante
mūḍhaḥ parapratyayaneyabuddhiḥ*⁴⁶

⁴⁶ *Mālavikāgnimitra* 1.2, with *purāṇam* for *navīnam* and *kāvyaṃ navam* for *vṛddhao naya*.